

# Seven Things Adult Learners Dislike

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## Why Worry About Adults?

As a result of the absence or the rather poor standard of English language teaching in Poland over the past few decades, we now have a low percentage of people who are fluent in any foreign language. The situation is certainly going to change as our school curricula are now strongly language-oriented. Children and teen-agers learn two or three languages at school and many pupils take additional lessons. The most popular of foreign languages is of course English.

The group who suffered most from the unfavourable socio-political situation was the middle-aged group. This group also does not want to "give up." They want to tune in to the times of change and learn English, which in many cases they now need for their career. Their younger colleagues, people who graduated from universities just several years ago when the educational institutions had not yet started to see foreign language learning as a priority, also have a lot to catch up with. They did learn some English, but one could hardly call them fluent speakers of the language. So they too take up English courses. If we combine the two groups, we can see that the market for teaching English to adults in Poland is a considerable one.

When teaching post-tertiary students, a teacher of English must be aware of the specifics of this group. Adult learners differ from other age groups in respect to their learning experience, memory type, motivation, and, most of all, in respect to their needs and expectations. As they are a little bit "behind schedule," they want to learn fast and see the results almost immediately. Generally, they are a likeable age group to teach, although there are things which simply do not work with them.

Having some experience of teaching English to adults, I decided to write out a questionnaire which would confirm some of my observations as to what irritates, frustrates, and demotivates learners in this age group. Knowing about the don'ts of teaching adults seemed as important as knowing about the do's. I decided that knowing about the dislikes of adults should help to make the teaching-learning process more effective and enjoyable for the learners.

## Sample and Questionnaire Profile

My sample consisted of 50 adult learners from two Polish cities: Krakow and Cieszyn. These learners underwent in-house training in English at the elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels organised by their employers. They come from the professional backgrounds of banking, public administration, and industry.

The questionnaire they were asked to fill in consisted of ten questions, three of them open-ended (e.g., "Are you satisfied with your textbook? Why? Why not?") and seven of the multiple-choice type. The choice of suggested answers was based on my observations and also included an "other" option.

The questionnaire asked the learners to admit to the things they dislike about learning English or would like to eliminate from the process in general, as well as to give reasons for both. Then it attempted to sound out more particular dislikes concerning such things as the textbook, type of classroom activities, exercises, materials, topics, and finally the teacher.

On the basis of the answers received, I discovered the following seven things that adult learners of English dislike most:

**1. Textbooks in English only.** Although adult learners appreciate the textbooks available on the Polish book market and used in most language courses for their clarity, logical structuring of the material, and pleasant visual form, one of the critical remarks about them is their lack of any language notes or explanations in Polish. Without seeing a word in their native language, the learners feel totally teacher-dependent and unable to use the textbook for self-study or revision at home. Learning words and grammar points which the learner did not memorise in the classroom or note down in class is difficult. The adult learner finds browsing through dictionaries and grammar compendiums in Polish too time-consuming and becomes discouraged from studying on his or her own.

Most textbooks in use are based on the communicative method which stresses the efficiency of teaching English through English; that is, to make the students "learn how to listen, to pick out key words, and begin to think for themselves, thereby reducing the amount of interference from L1" (Willis 1981). The learners, however, seem to find the idea of abandoning the native language a bit too challenging, at least when it comes to the textbooks they use.

If we think of Suggestopedic textbooks, which in an effort to minimize the learner's stress provide him with parallel columns of texts in the foreign and native language, respectively, we may come to a conclusion that some explanatory notes in Polish and bilingual glossaries may not do much harm. These notes would not only save the learners time, but also give them the sense of security they miss in the often new experience of learning a foreign language.

**2. Role-plays.** Many adult learners admit to their inhibitions when it comes to playing roles (i.e., pretending to be someone else). The problem with this kind of classroom activity boils down to the necessity of acting and improvising, which according to some learners requires special talent. Here adult learners prove more self-conscious than representatives of other age groups.

We must, however, account for individual differences which, irrespective of their age, allow some people to be more or less suited to dramatic activities. When asked to play a role of a tourist abroad or a customer in a shop, some learners will behave almost naturally, while, others, for whom the situation seems artificial, may lack ideas to enliven the activity. On the other hand, asked to play a totally unreal situation (e.g., "you are a police officer interviewing people for an

alibi"), some learners will let themselves be carried away by imagination while others will just be double-stressed, having to think not only how to say things in English, but what to say.

A solution to the latter problem may simply be giving the more inhibited learners more detailed briefing about their role, thus limiting the freedom of choice which seems to be troublesome for some adult learners. Foreign language learning without using language in situations would not be the same. As Byrne (1976) says: "We do not need to be over concerned if there are one or two students who find themselves unable to participate fully. Dramatic activities... involve more than just performance: the situation has to be discussed, the characters developed, the scene elaborated and the language to be used worked out. In these and other matters all students can participate fully." We must use the less inhibited or "more gifted" learners' potential and help those less likely to "improvise."

**3. *Drilling.*** When learning grammar, adult learners like to be given nice and clear explanations without too much specialist terminology so that they understand the problem fully before they start practising. With this cognitive approach to learning, when we move from the presentation stage to practice, adult learners are not very fond of typical drilling exercises like substitution, repetition, or transformation.

Doing these kinds of mechanical exercises, learners do not see how this rather passive activity could possibly improve their overall performance in the foreign language and they easily get disinterested. Their way of thinking seems to be, "I must first understand what it is all about and then try to use it myself in a sentence which is not so easy to predict." Intelligent learners, a term that includes most adults, soon realise that such exercises can be done without even trying to understand the sentence fully, which is rather pointless. When asked to do a drill-like exercise as their homework, adult learners can often be found to have "cheated," that is, having done the exercise without checking the unknown words.

As we cannot skip the guided practice altogether, adult learners must have something instead of habit-forming drills. They obviously prefer more involved activities, like answering open-ended questions, describing pictures or cartoon stories, or solving crossword puzzles. Another activity is a translation exercise in which each sentence, even though based on the same structure, is different and the adult learners have to build the sentence from scratch, paying attention to the meaning of what they are saying. Attention-capturing activities in which some thinking is required seem more suitable for adult learners of a foreign language. In some cases, however, pronunciation practice for example, we must smuggle in some drilling, as cognitive thinking will not be of much help here.

**4. *Textbooks with no reading material or with artificial texts.*** Perhaps as a remnant of the grammar-translation method with which they were once taught foreign languages, adult learners do not appreciate textbooks that feature dialogues, pictures, and charts, but have only a few rather short passages for reading. New vocabulary items seem to be better remembered if they are introduced in a context of a longer text, a structured entity devoted usually to one subject with which the learner later associates a group of new words.

Adult learners are not satisfied with just any reading material. They want it to be interesting and realistic. Adult learners do not seem to enjoy reading about imaginary characters who have just arrived from another planet. They are slightly surprised when presented with reports about made-up countries, they frown at texts they find far from true. If we want to discuss a text as a follow-up activity, the text must be of interest to the learners. What triggers discussion best are texts touching upon controversial matters (e.g., women priests, the advantages and disadvantages of the latest technical developments, etc.).

It seems that authentic texts, even at the elementary level, serve their purpose better than do artificially composed texts. They give the learners a challenge as well as a foretaste of real English. As many adult learners stress, they need to be equally acquainted with the spoken and written form of the foreign language they are learning. Aural-oral skills are important, but we must not forget that adult students need some more sound reading practice, too. Choosing a textbook with a sufficient amount of interesting, up-to-date reading material is what adult learners will certainly appreciate.

**5. Homework. What characterises an adult learner is his or her perennial lack of time.** Adult learners are busy enough carrying out their professional work and fulfilling family duties; so, if on top of that they decide to take up a foreign language, this becomes quite a burden. Adult learners do want to learn but have very little or no time for it at home. They expect to learn as much as possible in the classroom. Being assigned homework and not finding time to do it can be very frustrating and may eventually lead to giving up the course.

Whether or not to give homework is for the individual teacher to decide, once the teacher knows the "homework capacity" of the learners in a course. When assigning homework is pointless because the learners never do it, classroom activities must be enough. Much revision and remedial work, effective use of time, and some individual work (normally given as homework) in the classroom should solve the problem.

There may be alternative homework which does not require extra time, like listening to the radio or TV news in English and reading the press in English. Some Polish newspapers, for example, *Nowa Europa*, now have summaries of the issue's articles in English, and in almost any newspaper one can now find advertisements in English. A piece of advice for an adult learner can be, "just keep your eyes and ears open to the language you are learning and we can do without homework as such."

**6. Inflexible teachers.** Adult learners respond negatively to the teacher's using the textbook as the only teaching aid. They do not like the situation where the teacher uses the book in an indiscriminating way, prepares no other materials, or follows the teacher's book blindly. One of the reasons why adults are not very fond of conscientious, uninterrupted covering of the material in the textbook may be that they associate this kind of learning with their school years, which they obviously would not like to go back to as grown-up, professional people.

Sticking to the textbook material all the time sounds boring. It is necessary for the teacher to be innovative and prepare some extra materials and organise classroom activities in a different way

from what the textbook instructions suggest. Most textbook writers would agree that the teacher may sometimes deviate from or supplement the author's suggestions.

Adult learners expect their teacher to easily change the plans for the lesson, if such were the need of the group. The learners may ask for more situational language practice, or extra help in dealing with specialist language in their work. The teacher must be ready to adapt to the learners' temporary needs. Interesting ideas and a readiness to accommodate to the changing needs of the participants of the course is what adult learners appreciate about their teacher.

**7. Audiotapes.** This is one thing we cannot do without, even though some learners might hate it. The problem with listening-based activities is that they are, for some adult learners, the most frustrating ones. Adult learners seem to feel under more pressure when they are supposed to understand an aural, recorded text than when they are asked to speak. They complain about the quality of the recording and frown at any background noises. What irritates them most is "the impossible speed" at which the people in the recording speak.

The speed of authentic speech, obviously higher than that of a nonnative teacher to whom the students are accustomed; the background noises some recordings include; and the fact that the speakers do not always use standard English (on many cassettes there are voices of children, elderly people, people with different social and regional accents, or a combination of these) can make the learner's life rather difficult. There is, however, no other solution than introducing listening comprehension as often as possible so the learners overcome the problem by getting used to it.

In a situation where we cannot provide a native speaker as a teacher, we must use recorded conversations to acquaint the learners with authentic spoken English in some way. Transcripts of recorded texts for reference would help some learners feel more secure. The teacher must do his or her best to sugar the pill in any possible way, so that the adult students do not panic at the very sight of a tape recorder.

## Summing Up

Adults make demanding foreign language learners. They want their learning to be an almost stress-free activity which they can help plan. They would like to learn as much as possible in the classroom because they have difficulties reconciling home study with other duties. They do need some instruction and equivalents in their native language to feel very secure. What stresses them most are role-plays and listening to native speakers talking rapidly. Most certainly there are other things adult learners might dislike, and it is a very useful for the teacher not only to observe but to ask the learners openly about those things. The more you know about your learners' likes and dislikes, the more fulfilling and successful your classes will be.

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